

Rules of the Game

Familiars (Part Two)

By Skip Williams



Last week, we considered a few basics about familiars, from effective **Hit Dice** through **Intelligence**. This week, we'll look at more familiar basics, including Alertness, improved evasion, sharing **spells**, empathic link, and delivering **touch spells**.

More Special Abilities

As noted in Part One, most of these abilities are affected by proximity to the master or the master's **level**, or both.



- A familiar gives the master the benefits of the Alertness feat when it is within arm's reach of the master.

When a familiar's master is at least 1st level, the master gains a +2 **bonus** on Spot and Listen **checks** when the familiar is nearby. These bonuses don't stack with the Alertness feat (if the master has it).

The rules don't define "arm's reach" as it applies to familiars. It's worth noting, however, that the *Player's Handbook* is written with **Small** or **Medium** characters in mind. It is also written so as to downplay the 5-foot grid that governs movement and combat. So, the master gains the benefits of the Alertness feat while the familiar is within 5 feet and while there is an unbroken **line of effect** between the master and the familiar (but see below). For example, if there's a closed door between the master and familiar, the master doesn't get the Alertness benefit.

- A familiar gains the improved evasion special quality.

If a familiar with a master of at least 1st level is subjected to an attack that normally allows a **Reflex saving throw** for half **damage**, the familiar takes no damage if it makes a successful saving throw and half damage even if the saving throw fails. The familiar gets the benefit of this ability even when **flat-footed** or denied a **Dexterity** bonus (though in the latter case it probably is less likely to make a successful save).

- A familiar and master can share spells.

The master decides when spells are shared. To be shared, the master must cast the spell and the spell must have the master as its target. The spell must have a target entry; effect and area spells cannot be shared. See [Rules of the Game: Reading Spell Descriptions](#) for a discussion of targets, effects, and areas. Spells with touch range cannot be shared unless the master targets himself with the touch.

The master and familiar can share spells even if the spells normally do not affect creatures of the familiar's type (usually **magical beast**). The shared spell does not have to be an **arcane spell**; any spell the master casts himself can be shared with the familiar. The master cannot share **spell-like abilities** or **supernatural abilities**, nor can the master and familiar share effects from magic items.

To share a spell, the familiar must be within 5 feet of the master and there must be an unbroken line of effect between the master and the familiar. If the shared spell has a duration other than instantaneous, the familiar must remain within 5 feet of the master and maintain an unbroken line of effect to the master or lose the spell's benefits. Once the familiar loses the benefits from a particular casting of a spell, it cannot regain them again.

When the familiar and the master share a spell, they function as one being where the spell's effects are concerned. For example, if the master chooses to share a *teleport* spell with his familiar, the familiar doesn't count toward the spell's creature limit. Likewise, if the master shares a *water breathing* spell with his familiar, the familiar shares the master's portion of the spell's duration and does not count as another creature touched. A shared *mirror image* spell creates duplicates of both the master and the familiar, and a successful hit on either the master's or the familiar's image eliminates one duplicate master and one duplicate familiar. A shared *protection from energy* spell shields both the master and the familiar, but all energy damage that either the familiar or the master suffers is deducted from the total amount of energy the spell can absorb.

In spite of the foregoing, some aspects of the master and familiar always remain distinct. The master and familiar have two separate pools of **hit points**. If the master casts a **cure wounds spell**, the hit points bestowed must go either to the master or to the familiar. If points are left over after the chosen recipient reaches full hit points, the excess can go to the other pool. In a similar fashion, the master and familiar both have their own ability scores, and magic that enhances or improves an ability score must all go to either the master or the familiar.

Some spells have benefits that can be fully shared and other benefits that must be allocated to the familiar or to the master. For example, an *aid* spell grants temporary hit points and bestows a +1 **morale bonus** on **attack rolls** and **saves** against fear effects. If the master and the familiar share an *aid* spell, only one of them gets the temporary hit points, but both receive the morale bonus.

Some spells require special handling when shared. See Rules of the Game: All About Polymorph [{{link href="/default.asp?x=dnd/rg/20040511a"}}](/default.asp?x=dnd/rg/20040511a) for an example.

The master also has the option of casting any spell with a target of "you" on the familiar as a spell with touch range. If the master does so, he does not share the effect with the familiar, but the familiar retains the spell's benefits for as long as the spell lasts no matter where the familiar goes afterward.

- The familiar and master have an empathic link with a range of one mile.

The rules don't say so, but master and familiar don't need **line of sight** or line of effect to each other for the empathic link to work. The link, however, does not cross planar boundaries. If the master and familiar are on different planes, the link is temporarily broken, just as though they were out of range. This is a supernatural ability, so if either the master or the familiar is within an *antimagic field*, telepathic communication between the two is not possible.

Empathy is nonverbal, but limited. The master and familiar don't share senses and can exchange only emotions.

This requires as much effort as speaking (usually a free action), but empathic communication doesn't require a common language (or any language at all).

So, what, exactly, can a master and familiar communicate over the empathic link? As noted earlier, the link only transmits basic emotions, such as fear, hunger, happiness, or curiosity. So, the link is useful only for determining the master or familiar's emotional state. The familiar or master can report a state of fear over the link, but not what's causing that fear. You can reasonably assume that the link can transmit intensity of emotion. I suggest a four-step system: faint emotion (the merest stirring of an emotion, such as a feeling of fear when approaching a creepy building); moderate emotion (notable emotion, such as seeing a dangerous creature fairly close by); strong emotion (emotion that floods the mind, such as fear felt when a dangerous creature attacks); overwhelming emotion (emotion that drives out all other thoughts and feelings, such as when a dangerous creature has you in its claws).

Certain other key bits of information can travel over the empathic link (though the rules don't specifically say they do). If your familiar makes a successful saving throw against a hostile spell and feels a tingle, you'll feel the tingle, too. Likewise, you'll know if the familiar is **unconscious**, **dazed**, **stunned**, **nauseated**, **sickened**, or suffering from any other impairment that keeps it from acting. If the familiar falls prey to a charm or compulsion effect, you'll sense the familiar's muddled state of mind.

Some familiars (such as ravens and some improved familiars) have the ability to speak a language. Such familiars can use their empathic link power, but it still carries only basic emotions. The familiar can converse in the language the familiar knows (provided that the master also knows that language), but the two must be within normal speaking range to do so.

The empathic link makes a familiar an extension of the master's being, which means that when a familiar has been somewhere or experienced something, the master has the same connection to it as the familiar has. Once a familiar has been in a room, for example, the master can use a *teleport* spell to travel to that room as though he had been there himself. Likewise, if the familiar has seen an object, the master can use a *locate object* spell to find that object as though he had seen it himself (even though the master cannot view the object through the familiar's eyes while the familiar looks at it).

- A familiar can deliver touch spells for its master if the master is 3rd level or higher.

When casting a spell with touch range, the master can designate his familiar as the "toucher." The master and the familiar must be touching at the time of casting, and this requires the familiar and master to share the same space or be in adjacent spaces.

Once designated, the familiar can deliver the touch spell just as the master could. As normal, if the master casts another spell, the touch spell dissipates. If the familiar touches anything, the spell also dissipates.

Delivering a touch spell is a supernatural ability. The familiar uses an **action** to touch the spell recipient, usually the attack action, but no action is required to trigger the ability to deliver the spell.

Some touch spells have noticeable effects after they have been cast, and those effects are transferred to the familiar. For example, the *chill touch* spell makes the caster's hand glow blue. If the caster uses his familiar to deliver *chill touch*, the familiar glows blue.

The spell to be delivered does not have to be an arcane spell; the familiar can deliver any touch spell the master

casts.

The familiar can make a **melee touch attack** to deliver the spell, or the familiar can use a **natural weapon** to make a **melee attack** that delivers the spell. In the latter case, the attack must defeat the defender's normal **Armor Class**, but a hit deals the attack's normal damage plus the spell effect. If the familiar misses with the natural weapon, it is still holding the spell. If the familiar is allowed more than one attack, the first attack in the series that hits delivers the spell.

It's worth noting that all the foregoing applies to spells with range touch (see [Rules of the Game: Reading Spell Descriptions](#)). Sometimes, a spell allows the caster to make a **ranged touch attack** to deliver the spell. Such a spell does not have touch range.

What's Next?

We've run out of time once again. Next week, we'll conclude our overview of familiar abilities and move on to a few other topics concerning familiars.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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